

## UK's F-35 Jets Flying Without Key Strike Weapons as Ministry of Defence Seeks Interim Solution

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The United Kingdom's fleet of F-35B Lightning II fighter jets is currently operating without critical long-range weapons, according to findings from the National Audit Office (NAO). The Ministry of Defence (MOD) is now exploring interim munitions to fill the capability gap as British-designed weapon systems face delays extending into the next decade.

The F-35B, a fifth-generation stealth aircraft with short take-off and vertical landing (STOVL) capabilities, is a key component of the UK's future combat air strategy. However, neither the Meteor air-to-air missile nor the SPEAR 3 (Selected Precision Effects At Range) air-to-surface strike weapon will be operational on these jets until the early 2030s.

To address the gap, the MOD is reportedly considering the procurement of the US-made GBU-53/B StormBreaker, a precision-guided bomb designed for use in all weather conditions and capable of striking moving targets at stand-off ranges. While discussions are ongoing, no formal funding has been allocated.

The audit highlights operational limitations caused by the delay. Without these advanced munitions, the F-35B is unable to deliver long-range precision strikes, leaving pilots dependent on shorter-range, laser-guided weapons, thus compromising the aircraft's full combat potential in contested environments.

The situation has also impacted the programme's overall readiness. The MOD has already pushed back Full Operational Capability (FOC) for the F-35B fleet to late 2025. This delay is further exacerbated by wider logistical challenges and manpower shortages, especially due to the insufficiency of qualified engineering personnel and insufficient logistical support facilities.

Financially, the F-35 programme has cost the UK over £11 billion so far, with total projected lifetime expenses expected to reach £71 billion, above the MOD's earlier estimate of £18.8 billion. Nonetheless, the UK remains a significant industrial partner in the global F-35 programme,

contributing approximately 15 percent of production value and securing £22 billion in contracts for British firms.

From a centre-right perspective, the need to safeguard national defence investment is clear. To uphold its commitments to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and sustain a credible defence posture, the Ministry of Defence (MOD) must swiftly procure temporary strike capabilities and expedite the deployment of UK-designed weapon systems.

With rising global threats and the aircraft already in service with the Royal Air Force (RAF) and Royal Navy, the UK cannot afford to operate a flagship platform at partial capability. Bridging the strike gap now will ensure that taxpayer investment translates into real-world defence readiness.